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ABSTRACT

This study explores: (1) on the theoretical level, the relationship of certain personality characteristics to second language learning among young children; and (2) on the practical level, if the bases parents use for deciding whether to enroll their child in a second language program are well-founded. In their kindergarten year, 63 French immersion pupils and 68 pupils in the English program with French as a second language were rated by their teachers on nine personality characteristics. These scores were correlated with the children's French language achievement scores in kindergarten, grade one and grade two. The results indicate that two personality characteristics dominated the significant correlations for the French immersion group. The English program data showed a similar pattern but with fewer significant correlations. A t-test indicated that the immersion children were rated significantly higher than the other group on three personality characteristics. Only one of these, however, correlated highly with French achievement and another appeared to have some negative effects. (Author)

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Personality Characteristics and Second Language Learning in Young Children: A Pilot Study

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ABSTRACT

This study explores (1) on the theoretical level, the relationship of certain personality characteristics to second language learning among young children and (2) on the practical level, if the bases parents use for deciding whether to enrol their child in a second language program are well-founded.

In their Kindergarten year, 63 French immersion pupils and 68 pupils in the English program with French as a second language were rated by their teachers on nine personality characteristics. These scores were correlated with the children's French language achievement scores in Kindergarten, grade one and grade two. The results indicate that two personality characteristics dominated the significant correlations for the French immersion group. The English program data showed a similar pattern but with fewer significant correlations. A t-test indicated that the immersion children were rated significantly higher than the other group on three personality characteristics. Only one of these, however, correlated highly with French achievement and another appeared to have some negative effects.

Personality Characteristics and Second Language Learning in Young Children: A Pilot Study[1]

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INTRODUCTION

The present study has been motivated by both practical and theoretical considerations. At a theoretical level, the study examines the relationship between specific characteristics and second language learning among young children. At a practical level, it examines if the personality bases parents use for deciding whether to enrol their child in a second language program are well-founded.

Research which has examined the role of personality characteristics in second language learning is quite limited. In reviewing the role of psychological and social factors in second language learning and bilingualism, Gardner (1975) points out that "one might anticipate a considerable body of research concerned with personality correlates of second language achievement, but a review of the literature suggests that relatively speaking this area has not been extensively investigated" (P. 18). The paucity of research in this area is perhaps even more evident when one looks for studies of young children.

Two studies, however, have some bearing on the issues at hand. Edwards and Casserly (1976) noted differences in personality characteristics as indicated by the Early School Personality Questionnaire between students in an early-grade French immersion program and students in a regular English

program[3] at the grade two level. They conclude that "there are a number of personality differences between groups such as the tendency of the immersion group to be more assertive, independent and to be critical and abstract thinkers. This is probably due less to the program than it is to preselection factors affecting the parents' choice of a second language option for their child" (p. 318).

Edwards and Casserly undertook their research specifically to demonstrate that the second language program (immersion) did not have any detrimental effects on personality development rather than to examine whether certain personality traits were associated with high or low achievement in the second language. This latter issue was investigated by Tucker, Hamayan and Genesee (1976) who administered the Junior-Senior High School Personality Questionnaire as well as cognitive, attitude and French language achievement tests to three groups of students. All groups were in grade seven at the time of testing. One group had been in a French immersion program since Kindergarten. The second group had been in a regular program up to grade seven, with French as a subject of instruction for one period a day. In grade seven, however, they received all their instruction in French except for English Language Arts. The third group was in a regular program with French as a second language from Kindergarten through grade seven.

Tucker, Hamayan and Genesee conclude that: "There were important interaction effects between group membership and personality traits for the two expressive interpersonal skills - listening comprehension and oral production. In particular, success for students in the one-year late immersion program seems to be associated with being adventuresome and attempting to utilize French in the community. This cluster of traits seems less important as a predictor of success for students from the early immersion program who have been using French over a period of eight years." (p. 26).

These two sets of data indicate that (1) the personality characterstics of early-grade French immersion pupils appear to be somewhat different from those of pupils in the regular English program, although whether they were initially different cannot be ascertained from the Edwards and Casserly study, and (2) certain characteristics such as "adventuresome" are more important to the development of speaking and listening skills at a later age than at an earlier age.

In the present study, the personality data were collected early in the Kindergarten year in order to determine if initial differences existed in personality characteristics between pupils in the French immersion program and those in the regular English program. Existing differences are interpreted as an indication of personality characteristics that parents perceive to be important for success in a French immersion program.[4] Correlations are then calculated between each personality trait and various French language scores obtained by the students in Kindergarten, grade one and grade two to determine if particular characteristics are associated with second language learning.

METHOD

Subjects: The children involved in this study are 63 French immersion pupils and 68 English program pupils who have been tested each Spring as part of a long-term evaluation of early-grade French immersion programs undertaken by the Bilingual Education Project (BEP) of the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education.[5] The children were enrolled in their respective programs at the Kindergarten level in September, 1972 in five schools of the Ottawa Board of Education and the Carleton Board of Education. The immersion program pupils received all their instruction in French in Kindergarten and grade one.

In grade two they continued to receive all their instruction in English Language Arts. The English program pupils received all their instruction in English in Kindergarten through grade two except for 20-40 minutes per day of French as a second language (FSL) instruction. Both groups of pupils were from similar socio-economic backgrounds and were from English-speaking homes. There was approximately the same number of boys and girls in each group.

Procedures and test materials: (1) during the latter part of September (1972) the classroom teachers assessed each child's personality using an instrument developed by BEP.[6] The instrument used was composed of nine items in each of which the teacher was asked to chooose, from among five or six alternatives, the statement that best described the child. Each set of statements was designed to represent four of five degrees of intensity of one personality characteristic. The nine characteristics included were quickness in grasping new concepts, clinging to and defending one's own opinions, cheerfulness and happiness, perfectionist tendencies, sociability, imaginativeness and creativeness, independence, anxiousness and talkativeness. The category "unable to judge" was included in each of the items. The characteristics used were a distillation of other personality test items and aspects of personality which have been considered important in second language learning, such as outgoingness, friendliness and talkativeness (Valette, 1964), sociability (Pritchard, 1952), social spontaneity (Smart, Elton & Burnett, 1970), and anxiety (Gardner & Smythe, 1975).

(2) In May and June of each year the pupils were administered a battery of tests. In this paper, only those test scores related to performance in French will be discussed. The tests administered were as follows:

In Kindergarten: (a) The French Comprehension Test (FCT), (Kindergarten level), a test developed by BEP to measure the child's comprehension of French. The FCT consists of four parts - vocabulary, phrases, questions and short stories.

In Grade One: (a) FCT (Grade One level) - given to only 36 English program students, and all immersion students. The format of both levels of the FCT is the same.

(b) Test de Rendement en Français (TRF), (Grade 1, 1971), a test of French achievement designed for, and normed on, native speakers of French in the Commission des Ecoles Catholiques de Montréal (CECM). Test items included identification of sounds, word definitions, vocabulary and spelling. It was administered only to immersion students.

(c) Test of Comprehension and Production (TCP), a test developed by BEP to measure the child's ability to understand and speak French. Three techniques were used: a sentence repetition task, a conversational task (with fixed questions asked of each child), and a story-telling task. This test was administered individually to each child in the immersion program only. Scores from this test that were used in the present study are:

i) the number of units (immediate constituents) repeated in the repetition task.

ii) the number of units correctly repeated in the repetition task.

iii) the number of appropriate responses to the set of questions posed in a conversational manner, as a measure of comprehension.

iv) the number of units spoken in response to the same set of questions, as a measure of production.

v) rating of fluency (1-3) in the story-telling task.

vi) rating of pronunciation (1-3) in the story-telling task.

vii) rating of intonation (1-3) in the story-telling task.

In Grade Two: a) FCT (Grade One Level)

b) TRF (Grade Two Level) - given to immersion students only.

c) BEP Test de Lecture (TL) (Grade Two Level) - French reading test given to immersion students only.

RESULTS

Considering first the personality measure itself, it was found that the ratings for each trait approximated a normal curve, with the exception of the trait related to cheerfulness and happiness. On this item, the highest number of scores was obtained for the first statement "Always seems to be cheerful and happy", the second highest number of scores for the second statement, and none for the fourth statement, "Is too distressed to function in most situations".

A comparison of immersion and English program pupils on each trait using the t-test revealed that teachers considered the immersion program children to be happier, to have more perfectionist tendencies and to be more talkative ($p < .05$). Immersion and English program students were judged by their teachers not to be different on such qualities as quickness in grasping new concepts, clinging to one's own opinion, sociability, independence and anxiousness.

Pearson product-moment correlations were calculated between each of the nine personality items and each of the second language scores for both groups of students. The significant correlations ($p < .05$) are shown in Table 1.

TABLE 1

Correlations Between Personality Traits and Second Language Scores for Immersion and English Program Pupils at Kindergarten, Grade One and Grade Two

	Personality Traits																	
French tests	Quickness in grasping new concepts		Clinging to one's own opinions		Happiness and cheerfulness		Perfectionist tendencies		Sociable		Imaginative and creative		Independent		Anxious		Talkative	
Kindergarten	Imm	Reg	Imm	Reg	Imm	Reg	Imm	Reg	Imm	Reg	Imm	Reg	Imm	Reg	Imm	Reg	Imm	Reg
FCT Vocab.	.50						.40											
FCT Phrases	.57	.42					.47	.49										
FCT Questions	.47		.40				.51											
FCT Stories	.42		.45				.40			-40								-49
FCT Total	.56						.49											
Grade One																		
FCT Vocab.																		
FCT Phrases	.42	.62					.52											
FCT Questions																		
FCT Stories	.44						.54				.56		.53					
FCT Total	.42	.66					.55				.43							
TRF		-		-		-		-		-		-		-		-		-
TCP-No units	.47	-	.37	-		-	.39	-		-		-		-		-		-
TCP-No units correct	.44	-		-	.31	-	.46	-		-		-		-		-		-
TCP-Compreh.		-		-	.39	-		-		-		-		-		-		-
TCP-Product.		-		-	.34	-	-	-		-		-		-		-		-
TCP-Fluency		-		-		-		-		-		-		-		-		-
TCP-Pronun.	-.35	-		-		-		-		-		-		-		-		-
TCP-Intonation		-		-		-		-		-		-		-		-		-
Grade Two																		
FCT Total		-	.60	-		-		-		-		-	.64	-		-		-
TRF	.50	-		-			.45	-		-		-		-		-		-
TL	.42	-		-		-		-		-		-		-	-.69	-		-

Note: All correlations given in the table are significant at $p < .05$.
Blanks indicate that a non-significant correlation was obtained.
Dashes indicate that the test was not administered.

As Table 1 indicates, the characteristics of quickness in grasping new concepts and perfectionist tendencies correlate significantly most frequently with second language scores for immersion program pupils. They also correlate significantly with the same second language scores with two exceptions - pronunciation in grade one and TL in grade two, where only quickness in grasping new concepts is significantly correlated. In the case of pronunciation, the correlation with quickness in grasping new concepts is negative (-35). In other words, the quicker the child is to grasp new concepts the less likely he is to have native-like pronunciation in French. As for the remaining significant correlations between personality characteristics and second language scores for immersion students, there is nothing in their distribution or size that gives clear indication of a meaningful pattern. It is perhaps worthy of note, however, that anxiousness is highly negatively correlated with TL scores (-.69). In other words, the more anxious the student, the less likely he is to perform well in a test of reading in the second language.

The most striking difference between the English program results and the immersion program results is the paucity of significant correlations among the former group relative to the latter. The only positive significant correlations between personality traits and second language scores involve quickness in grasping new concepts and perfectionist tendencies - the same two traits which appeared most important amongst the immersion students. Two significant negative correlations also appear: both sociability and talkativeness are negatively correlated with scores on the FCT stories section at the Kindergarten level (.-40 and -.49 respectively).

CONCLUSIONS AND DISCUSSION

French immersion children were judged to be happier and more cheerful, more talkative and have a greater tendency towards perfectionism than English program children. This suggests that parents consider these traits to be important qualities for success in a French immersion program. Of these three traits, however, only one - perfectionist tendencies - correlated significantly and frequently with second language performance. Equally, if not more, important was the trait of quickness in grasping new concepts.

Considering only the trait of quickness in grasping new concepts, it was noted that this trait correlated positively with a number of second language performance measures but negatively with pronunciation. This suggests that particular personality characteristics may be helpful in some aspects of language learning while being a hindrance to others.

The fact that quickness in grasping new concepts and perfectionist tendencies were the most important characteristics in second language development for both immersion and English program students could be construed as support for the speculation that the same personality characteristics are important in second language learning among young children learning a second language in a formal educational setting. However, the results do not warrant any strong conclusion to this effect, although it is worthy of further investigation.

It is perhaps particularly important to note that characteristics such as talkativeness, which the parents considered important, and sociability, which teachers and adult learners consider important, do not appear to be related to second language learning among young children in

the more formal educational setting of either FSL classes or immersion classes. In fact, in the case of children learning a second language in a FSL class, the only significant correlations which appeared showed a negative relation between the traits of sociability and talkativeness and the development of an ability to understand a second language. Perhaps this is not surprising - children who are talkative and sociable, may spend less time listening, and it seems obvious that one has to listen in order to learn to understand the spoken version of a language.

The results from this study support the interpretation given by Edwards and Casserly (1976) that differences in personality characteristics found between immersion and English program pupils were due to preselection factors. The results also support the findings of Tucker, Hamayan and Genesee (1976) which suggest that for children in the early immersion program, attempting to use French in the community and adventuresomeness which must surely be related to sociability and talkativeness, are not critical in the development of second language speaking and listening skills.

Whether the relation between the personality variables considered in this paper and second language learning is a direct one, or whether other variables intervene can, of course, not be answered by this study. It may be that in an educational setting, talkativeness and sociability are not valued traits. Talkative and sociable children may disrupt teaching, disturb silent periods, and generally speaking, be considered discipline problems. Teacher reaction may be such as to affect student learning.

This study began as a pilot investigation to determine whether there were initial differences in specific personality characteristics between children who were enrolled in a French immersion program and those who were enrolled in the English program, and what role, if any, these

personality characteristics played in second language learning. It would be interesting to know if similar differences in personality would be found in the children presently entering each program, now that the immersion program has expanded considerably. It would also be interesting to know if the same children who entered in 1972 would now be rated similarly on the personality traits by their teachers, as they were by their Kindergarten teacher, or if changes have occurred due to program, maturation, etc. And finally, it would be interesting to know if the same characteristics which appear to be important in second language learning in this study, would be equally important in other learning environments and at other age levels of beginning learners.

FOOTNOTES

[1]This research was funded in part by a Grant in Aid of Educational Research from the Ministry of Education for the Province of Ontario.

[2]We wish to express our thanks to the administrations of the Ottawa Board of Education and the Carleton Board of Education and to the principals and teachers of the schools involved for their most helpful cooperation.

[3]These students had 60 - 75 minutes a day of French instruction.

[4]It is assumed here that the children themselves had little influence on the choice of the language learning program they were enrolled in. Moreover, the school did not screen the children specially on any aptitude or achievement grounds for entrance into either program.

[5]For a detailed description of the annual evaluation, see Swain and Barik, 1976. The pupils in this study consist of those pupils in Cohort III for whom data are available at each of the three grade levels.

[6]We wish to thank Dr. G. Neufeld of the Dept. of Linguistics, University of Ottawa for his help in developing the personality assessment instrument.

[7]For a fuller description of these tests see Swain and Barik, 1976.

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